DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 457 457 CG 031 227

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TITLE A Profile of Bereavement Supports in African American Church Congregations.
PUB DATE 2001-00-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Death Education and Counseling (23rd, Toronto, Canada, March 28-April 1, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bereavement; *Blacks; *Church Role; Churches; *Clergy; Counseling; Hospices (Terminal Care); *Outreach Programs; Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

Bereavement educators, counselors, clergy, and other specialists have observed that African Americans tend to under-utilize end-of-life palliative care services and general bereavement resources. The literature suggests that involving clergy in outreach to the African American community may be a viable strategy for developing bereavement supports. This paper looks at seven questions that can facilitate the process of engaging care and shares insights from a minister, two bereavement counselors, and two educators who are involved in church-based ministries with African Americans. The questions include: (1) what types of services are available in African American churches; (2) who can provide bereavement services; (3) when should they be offered; (4) where can they be provided; (5) how can they be instituted; (6) why is the church an important provider; and (7) what can a provider expect when taking on bereavement services. It suggests that it is important for counselors to develop skills to supplement and support the bereavement needs of the African American church as it seeks to broaden death and dying services to the community. (JDM)

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ED 457 457

A Profile of Bereavement Supports in African American Church Congregations

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A Profile of Bereavement Supports in African American Church Congregations

Introduction

Bereavement educators, counselors, clergy, and other specialists observe that African Americans tend to under-utilize end-of-life palliative care services and general bereavement resources. The physiological and psychological consequences of failing to mourn (i.e. "anxiety, clinical depression, hysteria, as well as character disorder") have been well documented by Worden (1991, p. 2) and Barrett (2000, p. 220). Of particular concern is the fact that many African Americans who would potentially benefit from bereavement support are unable or unwilling to engage with health and mental health care institutions providing such services. Barrett attributes African Americans' resistance and/or inability to utilize traditional bereavement services to factors such as "low socioeconomic status, lack of access to health care, cultural alienation, and cultural mistrust (Barrett, p. 220).

The literature suggests that involving the clergy in outreach to the African American community may a viable strategy for developing bereavement supports. Historically, the church has been the center of culture and faith traditions for many African Americans. The role of the minister in providing leadership and guidance in the spiritual and practical domains of life remain strong. Through active collaboration with African

American churches, opportunities for creative programming and the development of enlarged resources to address bereavement concerns are made possible (Moore, 1999, Moore & Phillips, 1994). Prior to engaging the church community, however, it is first necessary to tune into several basic questions related to what some churches may already be doing to meet the bereavement needs of its members. We believe that this paper will be particularly helpful to bereavement specialists (educators, counselors, mental health professionals) interested in conducting a more formal community needs assessment.

This paper answers seven questions that will facilitate the basic process of "tuning-in" and will share practice-wisdom from a minister, two bereavement counselors, and two educators involved in church-based bereavement ministries in African American churches. The questions asked were: (1) What is the nature and scope of bereavement services provided in some African American Churches?; (2) Who can provide bereavement services?; (3) When should bereavement services be offered?; (4) Where can bereavement services be provided?; (5) How can bereavement services be instituted?; (6) Why is the church an important provider of bereavement services?; and (7) What can one expect if undertaking a church based bereavement ministry with an African American congregation?

I. What is the nature and scope of bereavement services provided in some African American Churches?

Increasingly, African American pastors are attending to the need of promoting healthy grief work in their church congregations. Among African Americans, the practice of comforting those who grieve is not a new concept, however, the nature of services provided is not always understood. Traditionally, "the Christian belief system and the right to grieve permitted in church service rituals have cultivated a nurturing environment that has served as a buffer against a history of slavery, racism, death by natural and unnatural means, and a multitude of sorrows and burdens of living experienced by blacks. Specific areas of worship which facilitate grief include worship through prayer, gospel, song, Sunday morning worship ritual, Wednesday night prayer meeting, Bible study and annual revival meetings to mention a few. Even if someone is marginal to the church, there is always someone in the community who attends church and will pray for the bereaved." (Moore and Phillips, 1994, pp. 110-111).

Most churches offer services to those who are grieving, through ministries which fall under the umbrella of a Health and Wholeness Ministry, a Counseling Ministry or an Outreach Ministry. These ministries typically include visiting the dying individual, performing last rites, phone calls, sending letters to the survivors, or visiting with family members. However, these services are not always formalized and may vary depending on the size of the congregation and the general resources that are available to support a bereavement program. Traditionally, bereavement support has been based on the African American custom of home gatherings by friends, neighbors, and the church community

This tradition has worked until well after the funeral, when visitation falls off and those who grieve are often left to continue mourning alone.

II. Who can provide bereavement services?

Death, in and of itself becomes an abstract event when it is devoid of protocol and viewed in a vacuum. "When we walk to the edge of all the light, we have to take a step into the darkness of the unknown, we must believe one of two things will happen - there will be something solid for us to stand upon, or we will be taught to fly (Lynn, 1999, p. 38)." Although scripture-based individual, family and group support is provided for those who grieve, ministers have been increasingly seeking assistance from bereavement professionals to help them in developing bereavement services.

Usually the church seeks out a member who can be trained or who will train interested parishioners in the area of bereavement support. Based on the resources of the church, a training program may consist of an eight to ten week module culminating in a memorial service. Bereavement support group participants are subsequently identified from the memorial service and the groups are formed for six to eight-week sessions, thus formalizing a bereavement program within the congregation.

Individuals who agree to become involved in this type of ministry should possess a sincere desire to assist people in crisis and have a natural propensity for compassion and caring. These are the kinds of qualities that set the foundation for grief training. "The

theoretical underpinnings of a good training program should be built on the principles of adult teaching that mix experiential and didactic learning (Moore, 1999, p. 392)." Learning conducted in an atmosphere that encourages learners to be empathic, non-judgmental and active listeners is the key to communicating with those grieving the loss of a loved one or a friend.

Such individuals are best found among social workers, teachers, counselors, nurses, public health personnel, funeral undertakers, clergy, chaplains and persons who have been through the grieving process themselves and have successfully found their way to go on living without the lost loved one. As a professional group, social workers with clinical training may come to grief work with the practical skills required to administer bereavement support. This professional group has been singled out, because of the nature of the supervised internship programs involved in professional social work training. Indeed, in many African American churches, the social service ministries are directed by social workers.

In terms of the ministerial profession, ministers, like doctors, tend to be resistant to a death and dying curricula that is not grounded in the Bible or in Medicine. However, this theological stance may not be experienced as comforting to grieving parishioners who may, as a normal aspect of bereavement, be angry with God. Death tends to precipitate a quest to make sense out of loss. It can be a major secondary loss for an individual to feel that their religion, or faith does not answer the question of why a particular death occurred (Rando, 1998, pp. 31-32).

Regarding the role of lay leaders in the congregation, this group is comprised of people from various backgrounds in social services, mental health, and education. Their training orientation may or may not prepare them with the requisite skills to provide bereavement supports, however, training that emphasizes the facilitation of growth through the acquisition of new knowledge and problem-solving activities can be a tremendous mechanism in helping Christian Human Service professionals and lay persons develop the skills required to facilitate healthy grief work.

III. When should bereavement services be provided?

Ideally, bereavement services are planned and are ongoing in anticipation of the inevitability of death. A successful bereavement effort should, therefore, target two levels. First, it is absolutely necessary that a service program be in place to address the immediate impact of a death. For example, those who grieve need help tuning into the various emotions they will experience, and, secondly, those in mourning need assurance that they will be supported throughout the grief process.

The underlying assumption of these two levels is that the church will make sure that structures are in place to normalize the grief experience. A memorial service that provides a structure for group support on an out-reach basis can be a first step toward developing such a program; and in alleviating feelings of isolation commonly associated with the anniversary date of a death.

IV. Where can bereavement services be provided?

Any private space where confidentiality is assured can be designated for a bereavement program. Space can be provided in a church, school, mental health institution, funeral home, hospital, or the group leader's place of residence. The bereaved may not want to return to the place where their loved one died or was funeralized, (hospital or funeral home), so that an alternate site would provide a comfort zone for the survivor(s).

V. How can bereavement services be instituted?

There are many ways to institute a bereavement program. It is crucial, however, that the leaders of the church support these services and do not view them as an intrusion within the church's organizational structure. Strategies of group development can range from the informal to the formal. For example, a group of persons in grief may choose to get together and share their feelings and experiences.

Formal strategies, however, include starting with a preliminary consultation, establishing the need for services based on a formal needs assessment and developing a proposal outlining the financial needs required to support a grief ministry. A formal proposal would anticipate and plan for the following (1) the make-up of the group (general bereavement, AIDS bereavement, suicide or widows groups, etc.); (2) the size of

the group, (3) the structure of the group (open or closed), (4) the leadership of the group (one group leader or co-leaders), (5) the appropriate time and space (a place without interruptions), and (6) the mission or philosophical stance guiding the provision of bereavement services (the role of prayer or theology during sessions). Once the proposal is accepted, it is possible to advertise the plan and enlist prospective group members.

VI. Why is the church an important provider of bereavement services?

The church is a major resource for most African Americans. Even though, as an institution, African American churches have fallen short of providing a range of bereavement supports, the role of the clergy continues to be significant not only in administering last rites, but also in ministering to grieving family members. For example, within the church, there is a captive audience of believers who share a similar ethnicity and customs. There tends to be mutual understanding and a degree of trust within the congregation. Church members are usually willing to accommodate one another for the good of the whole. Lastly, the church is able to develop its bereavement ministry, free from governmental interference, by tapping into the expertise of its lay leaders.

VII. What can one expect if undertaking a church based bereavement ministry with an African American congregation?

When undertaking a church based bereavement ministry with an African-American congregation, one can expect initial opposition, misunderstanding and resistance. If the

church is progressive with a large stewardship offering, one can expect to have a bereavement ministry embraced by the church. Undertaking a bereavement ministry in many Christian churches is considered as "tithing" a portion of one's time. There is a greater likelihood of acceptance of a bereavement ministry if the pastor and the official board members are supportive and make the ministry an integral part of the Christian Education Department, or even a training facility for future generations and for the community. If success in this area is established, one may expect an increase in membership as people not affiliated with any church enjoy the benefits of the ministry and feel the need to be connected to a church.

On the contrary, a church must also take into consideration all of the aspects of providing a high quality, credible service. In order to avoid liability problems, a code of ethics must be in place that addresses (1) a code of conduct; (2) responsibilities to the bereaved; (3) confidentiality; and (4) responsibilities to the church. Liability insurance should be secured to protect the church from law suits. Those conducting the bereavement services should be well trained so that they can decipher grief issues from other practical issues that the bereaved may be facing.

Tom Attig (1983, pp. 6, 10-11) offers a list of six additional obstacles to providing church based grief supports:

a. intolerance for an individuals belief system or religious interpretations that may differ from one's own;

b. inhibiting factors which might block full and meaningful explorations of spirituality or spiritual expression, such as limited space, restricted continual access to counselors or spiritual leaders;

c. under appreciation of the power and value of religious or spiritual beliefs;

d. dominating emotions such as anger or guilt must be vented and then supported with religious beliefs;

e. convictions that are clearly dysfunctional must not be judged, but alternatives should be explored by the clergy.

Conclusion

In the death and dying paradigm, we must explore, innovate and adapt tools that have been established in bereavement services to accommodate African American churches. It is extremely important that we develop skills to supplement and support the bereavement needs of the African American church as it seeks to broaden death and dying religious services. In so doing, "one can expect lives to be blessed, hope restored, joy renewed, and the word of God going forth."

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